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DEBATING IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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Most of the objections raised against interscholastic athletics are due to the American conception of sport rather than to any inherent evil in athletics themselves. The paradoxical combination in the American character of a practical bent with an unreasoning enthusiasm has transformed our sport from a recreation into an exacting business. From this arise the accusations against American sport of commercialism and professionalism. To this, also, is due the charge that the informing spirit of our athletics is not, "Let the better team win," but, "Win at any cost." After watching closely for a number of years the development of interscholastic debating in one of our larger cities, the writer has been impressed by the fact that practically all the abuses charged against interscholastic athletics exist, with important additions, in interscholastic debating.

It must be understood in the first place that debating is regarded as one of the school sports. Instead of open discussion of a question, we have a game played by a certain number of players in accordance with strict regulations. The interest is shifted from the question itself to the winning of the game. It is no unusual sight to see a crowd of pupils patiently enduring for two hours speeches, the meaning of which they cannot follow, in the hope that at the finish they may have a chance to "root" for the home team.

Certain conditions, moreover, which exist in debating and not in athletics render debating contests more liable to abuse than those in athletics.

Chief among these conditions is the dependence of the debaters on their coaches. In a hundred-yard dash, no matter how painstaking his coach has been in training, it is the athlete himself who runs the race, whose physical power is put to a

supreme test. But in how many debates does the debater himself do all the work? In how many is the debater's mental power, ability to reason, nimbleness of wit, put to a supreme test? Is it not rather the custom for debaters and coach to spend five or six weeks in getting up set speeches, of which the greater part is the work of the coach? Not even the rebuttal is allowed to furnish opportunity for quick thought, for every possible argument of the opponents is anticipated, and carefully worded replies are prepared and learned verbatim by a speaker previously chosen for the purpose. It is not difficult, when one is acquainted with the coach, to recognize his very turns of expression in the debater's speech. Even when the teacher-coaches are not personally known, their work is often unmistakable, as in a recent interscholastic debate during which a visitor observed that each of the speeches of a certain team was constructed precisely alike, ending in a flourish of rhetorical questions. In many cases, therefore, the task of the debaters is reduced to the simple effort of committing to memory the work of the coaches. The contest, so far as the pupils are concerned, becomes a mere trial in glibness, about as genuine a test of mental capacity as would be a talking-match between well-trained parrots. The real test of strength is between the teacher-coaches. And all too often these exhibits are prepared at the expense of a nervous break-down for the teacher who tries to carry the burden of drilling the debaters in addition to heavy hours of regular classwork.

The efforts of these overworked coaches, however, do not always have a just reward, for in debating victory or defeat rests, not as in athletics upon the merits of the contestants as shown in visible achievement, but upon the decision of a board of judges. It is a delicate matter to criticize the men who generously give their time to the service of school boys and girls; yet the history of high-school debates shows that this matter of judges has been one of the most fruitful sources of trouble. The best of judges is so far human as to confuse at times his personal feeling with intellectual matters. The writer suspects that in some debates which she has heard the honorable judges

have been susceptible, unconsciously of course, to such insidious influences as class prejudice, personal friendship for a school or appreciation of its hospitality, or sympathy for a certain debater. The writer overheard, for instance, a teacher entertaining one of the judges, during an intermission, with an enthusiastic account of the struggle made by one of the debaters of the school to get an education and earn his living at the same time. The judge by his replies showed great sympathy. Probably the teacher was innocent of any intentional wrong-doing; but would not a fine ethical sense have forbidden as a conversational topic the eulogy of one of the debaters upon whose effort her listener must pass judgment? In another case a school secured as a judge for an important debate a gentleman who, it is reported, had a few weeks before expressed his profound interest in the school and his intention of befriending the school whenever he could. Yet this very school for the very same debate crossed off of the list of candidates submitted by their opponents the name of every judge who was connected with a local university for the apparent reason that one of the teachers in their opponents' school had taken courses in the university, although none of the professors whose names were submitted knew this fact. In each of these instances the school possessing the sympathy of the judge was given the decision.

It is frequently true, also, that when debates are held between institutions in different sections of the country the home team wins on account of a local prejudice for certain styles of debating. A notable instance of this occurred in a debate between a school in a southern state and one in a city farther north. The team of the latter school presented a closely analyzed, almost invulnerable argument, the points of which their opponents did not even attempt to meet, contenting themselves with rhetorical flights and humorous hits at their visitors. The southern gentlemen who acted as judges, brought up evidently in the old fire-eater style of oratory, awarded the victory to the local team. These amiable gentlemen even went so far as to explain that though the visitors might have had the best of the argument,

yet they thought the victory belonged to the local team on account of its oratory!

The truth is that very few men are qualified to act as judge in a high-school debate. Practically the only men fitted by their training for this office are judges on the bench and teachers of debating in schools and colleges. This is said, not in detraction of the gentlemen who have at any time filled the thankless office of judge at debates, but to bring out one of the respects in which debating is a less satisfactory form of sport than athletic games, in which victory is a matter of observation rather than of opinion.

One would suppose that if ever the human mind had arranged conditions necessitating fair play it was in the device by which those holding opposing views on some question meet one another face-to-face for an open public discussion. But the win-at-any-cost spirit which degrades interscholastic sports not only affects debating in undue use of the coach's work and in an ignoble conception of the judge's office, but it also enters into the conduct of the debate itself. Debaters seek to trick their opponents by bringing out some unsuspected and skilfully concealed meaning in a proposition, or they so phrase the question as to allow the possibility of debating a collateral, rather than the main, issue. To this end debaters, or rather their coaches, employ great shrewdness in formulating the question to be submitted to an opposing team. That this effort to avoid the obvious line of argument is a common practice is made clear in the following extract from a published interview with a well-known and successful debating coach. After attributing his success in winning debates to what he calls the "tricks of the art," he goes on to say:

Nothing is more disastrous in a debate than an unexpected argument. It is like a trick play in football—you are not ready for it. For this reason we try not only to be ready for any and every argument which the other side might advance, but we try to discover for our own side all the unexpected arguments we can get. An indifferently good argument which is unexpected and which, therefore, puzzles the other fellows and takes them off their feet, as it were, is better than ever so good a familiar argument for which you must know in advance that they are loaded.

Among numerous examples of debates conducted on this principle by one side, the two following will serve to illustrate:

Two high schools were debating the proposition, "Resolved, That the Chinese Exclusion Act should be repealed." Now a fair interpretation of this proposition would seem to make the issue hinge upon the question whether or not the Chinese are a desirable element to admit within our borders. The negative side devoted its efforts to proving that before the Chinese Exclusion Act the inundation of Chinese coolies was the cause of grave economic, social, and moral perils. Those on the affirmative admitted every argument of the negative and rested their case on the sole contention that a strict enforcement of the general immigration laws would eliminate all undesirable Chinese. The rebuttal for such a surprising argument was necessarily extempore and lacked the glibness of that prepared to meet the expected line of reasoning on the negative side. Fortunately, however, in this case two of the judges were college professors trained in judging law-school debates, and they gave their verdict against the team that had evaded the issue.

In the other case the proposition was "Resolved, That the attitude of organized labor toward free speech and free press is a menace to American civilization." The question was submitted soon after Justice Wright's sentence of three leaders of organized labor for contempt of court in connection with their maintenance of the boycott against the Buck Stove and Range Company. It was natural for the school having the choice of sides to think at first that the question of injunction was involved, but the closest analysis of the proposition revealed the fact that the only real issue was the justification of the boycott. The school to which the proposition was submitted chose the affirmative. Its argument was that the methods of boycotting employed by organized labor exceeded the right of free speech as guaranteed under the Constitution of the United States, and moreover invaded personal and property rights also guaranteed by the Constitution. The negative side boldly denied that the boycott was the issue, and, asserting that an expression occurring in a speech of Samuel Gompers, namely, "Punish, but do

not enjoin," summarized the attitude of organized labor toward free speech and free press, they proceeded to argue upon the proposition, "Resolved, That the use of injunctions to prohibit boycotts is unjustifiable," an entirely different question from the one they submitted.

The decision in this case is interesting as an illustration of what has already been said about the qualifications of judges. It was given two to one in favor of the negative. Now the judges voting for the negative were a clergyman and a scientist, while the judge who was keen enough to see through the quibble was a college professor of long experience in judging debates and of international fame in arbitration. Unfortunately, where such emphasis is placed upon winning, the fact that their team received the vote of the best-qualified judge is small consolation to the youthful supporters of the team. To the community at large, no matter how superior the work of their team may have been, the result of the debate is simply a defeat for their school. But in the name of education one asks, "Are such practices what we are to teach our charges? Shall we urge them to win by a snare rather than in open combat? Is the aim of debate the training of sharpers or the training of thinkers?"

Even when the argument is free from quibble there remain serious objections to inter-high-school debates as they are usually carried on. The rather servile habit into which our secondary schools have fallen of allowing the colleges to set their pace has exerted an unfortunate influence upon debating as well as upon other activities of high-school life. This is conspicuously in evidence in the nature of the questions debated. High-school pupils have aped the colleges, not only in athletics and in secret societies, but also in the substance and form of their propositions for argument. When one considers the difference in age, in courses of study, in training, between high-school boys and university students of sociology, economics, and law—for these are the students particularly interested in debates—the absurdity of following the example of the colleges is manifest. Intricate economic problems that are puzzling legislators, presidents, and cabinets, these young logicians settle with supreme ease.

Questions of international moment from which the Hague Tribunal would shrink, these embryo statesmen dispose of in two brief hours. It is a foregone conclusion that their handling of such topics will be second-hand, superficial, and of little worth to them or to their listeners. Well may they, after repeating speeches prepared at least in part by their coaches and largely above the ken of their fellow-students—well may they say in conclusion to their long-suffering audience, "I thank you."

A more serious objection, however, than the imposition upon the easy good-nature of an American audience is involved in the choice of too ambitious subjects for debate. It follows that where there is no true comprehension of issues there can be no sincere conviction. Debates upon questions above their heads tend to form habits of insincerity in argument in young debaters, an immoral tendency that should be stoutly resisted. The writer has heard the argument advanced in reply to this that it is very good training to argue against one's own conviction, that this is constantly done by lawyers in the courts. But is not the aim of high-school debating something broader than the training of lawyers? Is there not, moreover, a difference between giving an accused person the protection of his legal rights and presenting with thundering emphasis the arguments upon one side of a debatable question as if they were based upon one's most sincere convictions? And are high-school pupils mature enough to make proper moral distinctions for themselves?

We hear much nowadays about the teaching of morals in the public schools. But can we inculcate ethical principles in the classroom, and at the same time train debaters to win for their school by a quibble, in speeches that are largely the work of their teachers but which they offer as their own, and by advocating a policy in which frequently they do not believe? Is the premium in such a system put upon honesty and fair play? Does the whole system of interscholastic debating, with its careful coaching, its suspicion of judges, its attempts to overcome opponents by a trick, its loud voicing of insincere arguments above the mind of the average pupil, and, in all and above all, its straining by every possible device to win a favorable decision—

can such a system develop good citizenship? Does it make for high character? Has it done for the pupil what debating is supposed to do?

This brings us to the question, What is the purpose of high-school debating? If the aim of all our school work is preparation for life, then, assuredly, training in school debates should develop the qualities requisite for dealing with the differences of opinion which the pupils will encounter in maturer life. The world has always been filled with differences of opinion from the time of the first dispute in the garden of Eden. In primitive ages differences were settled by the fists. Later forms of this primitive searching after the truth have been the trial by combat, the tournament, the duel. For thousands of years international differences of opinion have been settled by force of arms. Lately, however, these methods have been going out of fashion. Physical force is being replaced by reasoning processes. We point to the substitution of strife by argument for strife by arms as the crowning achievement of civilization, and men are beginning to congratulate themselves that even Tennyson's dream of a "parliament of the world" will soon be a reality. We would do well, then, to train high-school pupils in the power to reason; but can they get such training when their teachers plan most of their arguments? We would do well to teach them forceful expression of their own convictions; but can this be secured by furnishing debaters first with the convictions and secondly with the proper expression of them? All forms of contest, moreover—the mediaeval tournament, the most devastating war, the prize-fight even—have their ethics; can winning a debate by springing a surprise upon one's opponents be fairly called a contest, any more than springing from ambush upon an unsuspecting enemy?

No, under the influence of the American conception of sport we have been drifting away from true debating. Compare, for instance, a series of interscholastic debates with the Lincoln-Douglas debates. If it is urged that there is no comparison between such different cases, the answer is that, barring the depth and intricacy of the question involved, there ought to be. There

ought to be the same comprehension and grasp of the subject, the same readiness to reply out of the fulness of knowledge, the same earnestness of conviction. Something of this atmosphere and spirit seems to pervade the informal discussions upon public affairs held in their college rooms by English university students. We read with wonder and delight of that debating society at Cambridge, the membership of which now reads like a roll of England's greatest names of the Victorian era—Tennyson, Hallam, Monkton Milnes, Henry Alford, Thackeray, Merivale, Trench. It is said in explanation of the deep interest shown by English students that they realize that they belong to the class which will in a few years be governing the British Empire. But in a democracy like ours, in which the high school is the university of the people, the government devolves, not upon a particular class, but upon all the young men of the nation. If, then, we prepare boys in our public schools for debating upon public affairs in later life, we should give them opportunities for genuine debate upon subjects in which they are personally interested. We should have them achieve intellectual power as they do physical vigor, by personal effort. Above all, if there is this educational value in debating, then we should devise means by which every pupil shall receive such training. Interscholastic athletics are being condemned because they overtrain the few at the expense of the many. Precisely the same reasoning holds in interscholastic debating. The same time and effort spent by the coaches on a few over-trained students for the so-called debate would serve for the oversight and direction of two or more flourishing student societies within the school. Dr. Sargent pithily sums up the present athletic situation when he says, "What we need is not more student athletes, but more athletic students." Similarly we may say of high-school debating, "What we need is not more student debaters, but more debating students."

Desirous as the writer is to see a reform in debating as it is now carried on in many high schools, she recognizes the fact that in schools where a highly artificial system of debates has been developed the sudden and complete abolition of competitive

debating might be inadvisable. She would urge, however, that such changes be made as would place the emphasis upon the training, rather than upon the exhibition, of debaters. As far as possible the competitive debates should be intrascholastic. Where interscholastic debates continue to be held, they should be made an incident of the training in debate instead of the climax of a system of high-school sport. The organization of more than one society for debating within the school, of literary clubs, of students' congresses, will bring a larger number of pupils into the practice of debating. And this, if debating is worth while at all, should be the first step in the reform of high-school debating.

The writer has been helping in an effort to bring about such a reform in the high school where she is teaching. The pupils have been divided into two debating groups, representatives of which meet in public debate every two weeks. Each of the competing teams is composed of members so chosen from the different classes in the school as to give no marked advantage to either team. This effort has met with unlooked-for success from the very start. So widespread is the interest that there has not been room for all the pupils who wished to attend. Only topics of local interest have been debated: such as making American history a compulsory study in the high school, abolishing coeducation in the high school, substituting "soccer" for the present game of football, closing the local motion-picture shows on Sundays, adopting a system of scholastic honors for high-school pupils, changing the time of the commencement exercises from afternoon to morning. More debates for more pupils lead inevitably to the choice of simpler and more familiar subjects for discussion.

It may be objected that such subjects do very well for intrascholastic debates, but that they are not suitable for debates between schools. This objection is not sustained by experience. The best interscholastic debate the writer ever heard, from the point of view both of genuine interest and sincerity on the part of the debaters concerned and of the interest and sympathy of the audience, was on the proposition that interscholastic athletics

were detrimental to the best interests of the local schools. It happened that the school upholding the affirmative was distinguished more for its scholarship than for its athletic honors, whereas its opponents were athletic champions. The ring of genuineness in this debate pleased all who heard it. These personal questions are always with us. Questions of changes in the curriculum, in textbooks, in methods, in the social life of the school, are debated outside by the pupils. Why not inside? The great recommendation for such questions is the student's thorough familiarity with and strong feeling upon them, which make it possible for him to argue with honest conviction.

The writer, who has been studying this question for a number of years, is almost persuaded that the most effective and lasting training comes from the informal debates aroused in the regular classes over questions with which the pupils are familiar from close study. Such questions present themselves every day. Did Themistocles or Aristides do more for Athens? Could Brutus have succeeded in preserving the Roman republic if he had not made his mistakes in judgment? Did Shakespeare intend Hamlet to be insane? If not, is the pretense of insanity a happy device? Did Lady Macbeth really faint? Would Macbeth have murdered Duncan without the suggestion of the witches? Did Portia help Bassanio's choice of the caskets by a hint? Was the execution of Charles I justifiable? Is England's success as a colonizer due chiefly to the Norman or to the Saxon principle in her government? Does Addison's description of Sir Roger de Coverley's treatment of his household furnish any help to our modern servant problem? If Charles Lamb is right when he says that we enjoy more the simple pleasures bought by sacrifice than those purchased out of the abundance of wealth, is it worth while to struggle for riches? Was the University of New York justified in excluding Poe from its Hall of Fame? Any teacher can extend such a list of questions indefinitely. Such informal debates, in which the whole class takes part while the teacher merely presides, not only put life into the work in history and literature, but resemble in

circumstances the debates that will arise in the pupil's actual life.

The writer cannot refrain from illustrating this point further by the work of a colleague in an American history class of which she learned from the talk of the girls who sat in her own classroom. Some of these girls had very strong northern prejudices and others equally strong southern sympathies. Through the long discussion of states' rights beginning in the Constitutional Convention and ending at Appomattox this teacher guided her class, often amid bitter disputes when the feeling ran very high. She allowed the pupils to express their opinions freely, only modifying a statement here or correcting an impression there, or sometimes referring to an authority. The result was a wonderful broadening and heightening of character. At the end of the year the girl from New Hampshire had lost her scorn of Lee, as had the girl from Virginia her contempt for Lincoln. These Federals and Confederates of a later generation had learned that each side was fighting for a principle in which it believed with all its heart, that each side made generous sacrifices for its conviction, and that the valor of each side demanded the other's respect. These debates have taught the girls a nobler patriotism. How much more vital and formative such debating than the cut-and-dried game in which three picked students confront three other picked students, and deliver stereotyped speeches, often without a sincere conviction of the arguments they present!

To sum up briefly the recommendations for reform: Get as many pupils as possible into debating within the school. Decrease the number of interscholastic debates. Emphasize informal, spontaneous discussion. Do away with or reduce to a minimum the work of coach and judge. Debate questions closely related to the life of the pupil. Let pupils argue according to their own convictions. Accustom pupils to the idea of debating as a training in thought rather than an oratorical exhibition, as the practice of an art rather than a sporting spectacle, as a means rather than an end.